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THE AMERICAN CORRESPONDENCE OF LORD ERSKINE.

WITH NOTES BY THE HON. STUART ERSKINE.

IT is not too much to affirm that the unhappy condition to which Great Britain was reduced at the end of the last century is without parallel in the annals of that country. That such a condition conspired, moreover, to render imperative some of the most desperate expedients and some of the most courageous exploits ever recorded in the history of mankind, let alone of any single nation, is equally true. In fact, no previous epoch in British history can sustain a successful rivalry with it in wealth of stirring incident.

It was at this period, when the nation's hopes were lowest, when national bankruptcy seemed imminent, invasion a pre-ordained necessity, and disintegration inevitable, that Thomas Erskine, the famous Lord Chancellor, addressed the first of the following letters to his eldest son David Montague,¹ who was then residing in America. My ancestor, contrary to advice, had invested the greater part of his very respectable fortune amassed at the English bar—where his services in behalf of civil and religious liberty had earned for him imperishable fame—in the American funds, believing that this course was the best means of hereafter securing for himself and his family a monetary sufficiency appropriate to their position in life. His connection, however, with America, though in the first instance a material one,

¹ David Montague Erskine married the daughter of General John Cadwalader, of Philadelphia, in 1800, and had a large family. He was destined by his father for the bar and was called to that profession in 1802, but he had neither the genius nor energy which marked his father's character. He lacked that natural inclination to the subject, which is the only passport to success, and without which study and application can avail nothing. He lived to disappoint his father's expectations in respect to his legal pursuits, and to become British Minister at Munich.

was not limited altogether to a commercial instinct, but was conducted according to a principle he had ever professed and exercised, that of extending his approbation and affection to all, irrespective of nationality, that should have the liberty and well-being of their country and the freedom of their political institutions intimately at heart.

The correspondence of Lord Erskine, so far as it goes, is valuable as illustrating the state of Great Britain, and indirectly that of the United States, at the period in which the letters were composed, and as expressing the opinions of a most remarkable man concerning a young and remarkable nation.

In 1798 Lord Erskine, or rather Thomas Erskine, for he was not elevated to the peerage until the year 1806, was of opinion that his American property required that personal supervision and attention which he was prevented by the exigencies of a public career from giving to it personally. So it was resolved that David, being the eldest son and therefore the child most intimately concerned in the success of his American investments, should proceed on a mission to the United States, in order that he might act as his father's mediator and representative in that country. The letters that follow tell their own tale. The first of these homilies is addressed to David Erskine as he was on the point of leaving England, and is as follows :

LONDON, August ninth, 1798.

DEAR HOMO²: I have this moment received your letter. By a letter from General Smith to your mother to-day it turned out, as you said, that he had applied to Sir Sydney, which was friendly in the extreme. My courses at the cockpit stand over till to-morrow, & as I could not at soonest have come away till Saturday, I have given up coming to Portsmouth altogether, as I have no doubt at all that the wind will be round to the east by the new moon on Saturday.

I sent you yesterday packets of letters from Mr. King, 5 in Number. So that your credentials are now as compleat as possible. I would have you before you leave Portsmouth take care that you have a proper legible Pen & ink, & I advise you to get a few little red Books for taking memoranda as they occur to you, which you may make use of & transplant into your letters, & it will be by far the best way always to have a letter upon the stocks, carrying it on from day to day as anything material occurs with a fresh date; and as I shall preserve them, you may put in them everything which you would wish hereafter to remember, & it will besides give you the most useful of all habits, a turn for observation & the power of recording them. Besides, it may be very serviceable to you hereafter, if it

² A nickname which occurs frequently throughout these letters. I cannot speak authoritatively as to its origin.

appears to your friends here to whom I shall read what is material that you are making good use of your time & are in a course of improvement. As to your proceedings in America I trust everything to your Prudence; you will see men of all parties & opinions & you will have this comfort, that what agitates them will only be amusement & instruction to you, as it is not your own country. You will be able to judge for yourself the feelings & opinions of the wisest part of America & will thereby be better able to estimate the merits of the Great Political actors than by going with any preconceived opinions concerning them. With regard to your manners: *Let them be as frank & open as possible.* I would have it uppermost in my thoughts—it is of such immense importance—when a Man is of a certain Rank & of good feelings it never can degenerate into forwardness, & it does more to reconcile the world than all the other qualities put together which the best & wisest man can possess. Not forgetting that nothing is so decisive of success in the Law. Let me advise you not to travel with Englishmen. You will see them when you return. It is the vice of Englishmen that they herd together in all countries, & come back with their old Ideas. There is no rule without partial exceptions, which must depend on circumstances—but if anybody should wish to fasten upon you, & there is an awkwardness arising from it, you may say that I particularly asked it to be a rule with you. This is the more necessary because America is at present the receptacle of the vagabonds & blackguards of all countries, many of whom in their litigations & distresses will introduce themselves as acquaintances of mine. It is one of the uses of travelling to know how to deal with all these things. I forgot to say that you may tell Church that if you want money at New York before you go to Philadelphia I shall be particularly obliged to him if he will put you in the proper course.

.
Your affct. Father,

T. E.

For God's sake remember NAILS.³

The following letter contains its own explanation. Although no date is attached to it, it was clearly written on receipt of David Erskine's first communication announcing his safe arrival in America :

DEAR HOMO: I was very agreeably surprised by receiving your letter, as from the universal prevalence of Westerly hurricanes, from the date of your letter from Corke, I rather expected to hear of your being put back to Ireland, or of being driven to Norway, than of your arrival in America. I think you judged nicely in going to Norfolk, and having got an excellent map of the U. States on a large scale I shall be sorry if you do not go to the Federal City in your way to Philadelphia, as it seems to lye in your way, and will besides protract your arrival at Philadelphia till the season of safety.

³ Referring to David Erskine's finger nails, which he was in the habit of wearing longer than was either necessary or convenient.

I have the kindest letter in the World from Phineas Bond, who had received your letter. You cannot possibly have a better and a more faithful guide, and I am sure you will place great reliance upon his advice & judgment. When you have finished my business in America I leave it entirely to yourself the extent & duration of your Tour—Let it depend upon your comfort and the sensation you have of being in the course of rational improvements. Whether you return this autumn or the next—I leave entirely to yourself.

It was rather unfortunate that I purchased at the moment I did, as the funds in the phrenzy of Nelson's victory, the use made of that glorious event ought to have had a directly contrary effect, rose up 15 per cent., and the American falling 5 made a difference of about 20 per cent., so that if I had sold & bought at that critical period it would have made the difference of £5,000. However I do not repent what I did, as our intervenient escape from total ruin could not be rationally anticipated, and the funds have since fallen down again and are likely to sink lower.

The letters that follow are very similar in phrase and sentiment and not at all difficult to understand. Happily the gloomy prognostications contained in them were not destined to be fulfilled, although at the time there certainly existed ample probability that they would be verified.

MY DEAR HOMO: Your hint about the American funds is prudent, & fit to be most seriously attended to, & I therefore send you a power of attorney which will place my fortune there under your management. Nobody can have so strong an interest to fulfil the trust with prudence. The only restriction I put upon your discretion is this:—Not to sell upon distant speculation of Evil, but upon fair emergency & approach of danger. I would not, to be sure, be caught in the storm, but I would not throw my goods overboard until the danger is imminent. I use this simile because you will recollect, my dear Homo, that the last activities of my life are over. That I cannot expect to be able greatly to increase my property, & I must therefore take care to make it yield the most. If I sell, there is a dreadful loss of income, and you besides only contemplate the danger nearest to you; & as to Phineas, it is like speaking of colour to a blind man to attempt to shew him the dangers of the British funds & of all British property. The danger is most imminent. If there be peace, I am safe in America; If there be no peace, no man is safe for an hour in England. When you wrote your letter in April you did not look forward to what has since happened. I send you the best account of my speech on Bonaparte's proposal that I can find. I spoke near two hours, & you may therefore judge how imperfect it is. It made a great impression—so great a one that Pitt was obliged to get up & let Fox be behind him. Nobody spoke but Fox & myself on our side. To return to the subject of American Funds—I send you out fresh certificates. I had bought them before I received your letter, otherwise I would not have bought them. Before this you must know that Bonaparte passed the Alps in person, & reconquered Italy in one Battle which led to a capitulation of the whole Austrian Army. Whilst Masséna has entered Munich, driven the Elector of Bavaria from his capital, & is pursuing his course to Vienna, unless he is stopped by a peace—For nothing else can save

the Emperor or the forms of the ancient European government. My pamphlet begins to be a prophecy.⁴

Your affectionate Father,

T. E.

HAMPSTEAD, July 11th, 1800.

JULY 16TH, 1800.

. . . I write these few lines to say that I wish on no account to part with a single shilling of my American funds except under the pressure of past and imminent alarm for British property, the approach of which I can safely trust to your discernment. But I would rather lose the whole of it, and begin the world *de novo*, than be such a driveller as to trust a guinea of it to the funds of this undone country, I mean undone under its present system. I know perfectly well what I say, and they will be marrying and giving in marriage when the rain begins to come upon the earth. There is not the most distant prospect of peace, nor the least awakening of the people to the inevitable consequences of a protracted war whilst a ministry composed for the most part of absolute paupers are supported by the landed and monied interests for the utter ruin of all the resources of the nation. . . . The Emperor has rejected Bonaparte's proposal of peace. New subsidies are to be raised, and in my next letter you will hear of the fall of Vienna,⁵ and probably of the invasion of Ireland, which the French have certainly not abandoned, and in which they must succeed if they ever invade with an army, which they are now preparing to do. . . . P. S. I think I see by authentic news to-day a glimmering of a general peace.

LONDON, August 13th, 1800.

. . . Since you wrote to me on the subject of the stock, I have taken the greatest pains to investigate the state of American security from the most unexceptionable quarters; and I have even seen a letter written from the prison of Philadelphia from Mr. Cooper, who was convicted of libel on Adams, your President. I know Cooper personally, and have a great opinion of his abilities. He agrees with you that Jefferson will be President, but he sees no danger to the American government from that circumstance; yet I confess the fate of your government itself is the only thing with which I can connect an apprehension; for as to confiscation I cannot give faith to it, and I take it for granted that in the present state of America it is a most improbable event. Besides, trusts in such cases are never hunted out. The law is barely complied with. Neither nations nor individuals commit desperate and despicable pecuniary frauds; but under pecuniary pressures, to which America must be a stranger for many years to come. She will have a peace with France, though not directly. As to Great Britain, I see nothing but ruin staring her in the face. The people have totally lost their characteristic spirit, and if they had any spirit left the existing laws prevent the expression of it. Either an immediate continental peace will take place, and that before you can receive this, or else the

⁴ That on "The Causes & Consequences of the War with France." It ran through 48 editions.

⁵ The treaty of Lunéville (Feb. 9th, 1801), however, disappointed Lord Erskine's anticipations. Vienna was saved indeed, but the frontier of the Rhine was again ceded to France.

flame of war will be rekindled, and the political fabric of Europe will be finally consumed to ashes, and with it all the monopolies of this long favored country. I have seen so much of half politicians here, that I should think my property safer under Jefferson than Adams. Jefferson is an enemy to the crooked politics of England, but if England's government is administered with common sense America cannot be her enemy.

PORTSMOUTH, Feast of St. Michael, 1800.

. . . What the devil can possess you to admire the perseverance of our *once* glorious country, which you still stile glorious. Perseverance to connect itself either with common sense, or wisdom, or virtue, must be perseverance in what is right. The words for the contrary vice are obstinacy—infatuation—Blindness. The war never had an object but to perpetuate the ancient system of Tyranny & superstition which enslaved the world for centuries, & which would have enslaved the whole of it still, if Great Britain had not broke loose from it in the last age which gave birth to all her greatness till touched by the corruption which I am afraid is inseparable from it. She set about replunging the world (if she could) in the gulph from which she had escaped & from which other nations were escaping. She began with America & was defeated. The attempt & the defeat emancipated France by its example & its consequences, & in the attempt against France she has been defeated again. Depend upon it, if the war continues, This country is, without a figure, undone, undone in every sense in which the term can be applied. The inhabitants of this country are starving, & of course shaken loose from all sound connection with the state, and they only can live who are the plunderers & oppressors of the public. You will scarcely know England when you come back, but in the beauty of the fields, & the highly cultivated life which attends a corrupted and enslaved country to its very grave. In Hampstead you will see no change except that the laurels & trees next the road shut out the public which gave me all I want, and the kitchen garden, which has half ruined me, now promises to be my greengrocer throughout the year. . . . Phineas & yourself write like mere children. You know nothing of the desperate state of England. You (know) of her by times that are past. I see you thoroughly understand my instructions. Nothing but necessity most imminent, of which you cannot be mistaken, would induce me to sell my stock, & I would rather lose the whole of it than have it in the funds of this country—because I cannot, with my eyes open, run my fortunes upon a rock when it stares me in the face. I will not become a Landholder in America whilst her Laws of alienage remain; but I will immediately if she changes them; which Phineas seems to expect. . . . I have not changed any sentiment I expressed to you, but my opinion of the prosperity of America and a dawn of great happiness for her I am confirmed in. I do not mean as a country for living in, but for keeping the means of living in until the horizon of Europe after the storm shall be cleared up. I cannot see through it yet.

FEBY. 1ST, 1801.

DEAR HOMO: I consider the election of Jefferson in the light I did before. I think it HIGHLY beneficial to America & likely to support the union. I should have thought so still more strongly had the parties not run so nearly even. Depend upon it, David, the principles of the Federalists as you describe

them to me are not favourable to American greatness or liberty. Under the present circumstances of the World an alliance with France of the most cordial nature is true interest of the United States. It would be wise to adopt it without breaking with England, because universal peace is the true policy of all nations; but with regard to England under her present establishment, at all events under her present administration, she does not deserve the name of a nation, & I think it probable that I shall be obliged to stop your coming to England in the summer, if no peace takes place, as it would be unwise to come over to be witness to a foreign invasion & a revolution. I scarcely know what to write to you about my stock, because I think it in danger Here or with you. If this administration, this accursed administration, continues, there is no asylum for a Briton upon the face of the earth. I may be confiscated in America, tho' I have opposed all the violence which will provoke the quarrel, & I may be confiscated here by the blowing up of the funds; because my property is not sufficient to invest in Lands, which besides are scarcely worth holding from the taxes which load them, & which will soon make every man in England a mere tax-gatherer for government. As things are at present, with all my prosperity, I cannot save a farthing in the year and am even in debt at the end of it. You know that We are going to War; indeed it may be said We are already engaged in one with Russia, Prussia, Sweden, & Denmark, in addition to our former Enemies, France, Spain, & Holland, France having its foot on the neck of Germany. This war we begin with the funds at 5 per cent., famine stalking thro' the land, and the lower orders wholly disaffected. The King is too weak & prejudiced to be capable of feeling the situation to which his trust in wicked men has reduced the country, and the people seem to be quite indifferent to the consequences. It is this state of things that reduces me to a very great difficulty in determining what is best; but nevertheless a determination, & that an *immediate & distinct* one, must be made; *you* must know much sooner than *I* can whether America means to adhere to the Northern Confederacy or not. If She does not, I do not see any other probable cause of quarrel with England; if She does, my stock must be absolutely sold if trusts are doubtful, which probably they will be, because if She adheres to the Confederacy our Madman will stop her shipping, & America will retaliate by confiscating British property.

I wish the climate of America was a good one & the manners of its inhabitants something different. For England is *UNDONE*. Bond is quite bigotted on this subject & *will not* see the condition of this country. I wrote to you the catastrophe of my Estates left to me by A Stranger.⁶ An ignorant Scoundrel of an attorney destroyed the public intentions of the

⁶ In a letter from the Hon. Thomas Erskine to his son David Montagu in America, dated Jan. 13, 1801, he says, in regard to the matter:

"You will, no doubt, have seen in the newspapers that a gentleman had considered me in his will. I had never seen him, but after the payment of legacies, he left me his beautiful estates, one in Leicestershire, the other in Derbyshire. He was tenant in fee simple, and his will duly executed; but unfortunately the ignorance mixed with fraud, thro' out towards me, of a country attorney has destroyed everything but the fame of this bequest. The Testator owed two thousand pounds; and this attorney, instead of raising it by mortgage, began selling little outlying bits of the Derbyshire estate; and, merely from the rage of making deeds to put money in his own pocket, under pretence of making a better title to the purchaser of a mill, suffered a recovery of the whole Derbyshire estate, and although the deed was to the testator in fee simple, which absurd rule this stupid beast of an attorney had never heard of. The recovery applied to but one estate, which was the largest, and it threw all the legacies on the other, which devours it to the bone, and leaves me nothing but *the honor*."

Testator. Perhaps it is intended that my lot is not to be cast in this Land. I send you out some books, which I wish you to read attentively from the moment you receive them ; as if you are to come over, the Court of Chancery must be your forum. . . . Read immediately Milford's treatise, Then Fonblanque & then Coxe's Pease Williams. I foresaw great inconveniences on your first coming over, your wife very young & a total stranger here, yourself devoted to laborious attentions ; & an immediate establishment, however small, to create & keep up. I have provided against all this until you are fairly launched. . . . You have therefore everything to content you. Farewell. We send our united love to all of you.

Your affectionate father

T. ERSKINE.

I have compressed into the comparatively limited place at my disposal such of these letters as seem to me most appropriate to a short magazine sketch of this character. Others of course remain ; but those which have been given will, no doubt, suffice to arouse public interest in America in a man, who, by his own showing, entertained at one time serious thoughts of emigrating to the United States, and who is justly regarded in Britain as the greatest forensic orator of ancient and modern times.

STUART ERSKINE.